

STRATEGY
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THE BATTLE OF THE HÜRTGEN FOREST: WHY?

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

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The Battle of the Hürtgen Forest has received little attention since the end of World War II. It was never dissected and analyzed like the Battle of the Ardennes or the many other larger battles. The reasons are obvious. It was a battle of attrition that never should have occurred. Throughout this case study the strategic impact of the battle and the decisions made by the leaders of the day are analyzed. While this battle had little strategic importance in the final outcome of World War II, it had a substantial operational impact because it gave the Germans a secure northern flank allowing them to execute their attack through the Ardennes. The chronology of the battle is presented to illustrate the devastating impact it had on the men and units that fought there

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THE BATTLE OF THE HÜRTGEN FOREST: WHY?

The forest up there was a helluva eerie place to fight...Show me a man who went through the battle...and who says he never had a feeling of fear, and I'll show you a liar. You can't get all the dead because you can't find them, and they stay there to remind the guys advancing as to what might hit them. You can't get protection. You can't see. You can't get fields of fire. Artillery slashes the trees like a scythe. Everything is tangled. You can scarcely walk. Everybody is cold and wet, and the mixture of cold rain and sleet keeps falling. Then they jump off again, and soon there is only a handful of the old men left.

—T.SGT George Morgan,
1st Battalion, 22d Infantry

INTRODUCTION

The battle of the Hürtgen Forest is a chapter of American history that many have not heard of and others have tried to forget. The media back home did not cover the battles that occurred there and the senior commanders neglected to include this episode in their memoirs.

The American soldiers simply referred to the entire wooded area south of Aachen as the Hürtgen Forest. It actually consisted of the Wenau Forest, the Hürtgen Forest, and the Rötgen Woods. It covers an eighty square kilometer triangle formed by the towns of Aachen, Düren, and Monschau. The Hürtgen Forest region is characterized by a ridge system running southwest to northeast starting from the highest point of 2,100 feet in elevation west of Monschau to 600 feet in elevation within a few miles of Düren. The crests of the ridges were bald but were heavily forested on both sides. Near Monschau the ridge splits into three distinct segments. "One ridge line runs northwest of Simmerath to the Roer River near Nideggen. Another runs east from the vicinity of Germeter, and the third runs north from the head of the Weisser Weh Creek and flattens out near Gressenich."¹ These ridges dominate the surrounding area. The rivers are swift and cold with sometimes near vertical banks.

The road network through the Hürtgen Forest was extremely limited. The east-west roads were mostly forest trails and the north-south roads were fringed on both

sides by dense forest.² Resupply would be difficult because the forest trails would not allow vehicles thus tanks would not be able to support infantry in the attack. Evacuation of the wounded would be a nightmare because the wounded would have to be evacuated by litter bearers instead of by ambulances.

Dense fir trees that grew to 100 feet or more characterized the forest itself. The trees, in most areas, grew so close together that they almost completely blocked out the light to a point that an attacker could not see more than a few feet in any direction. During this time of year sunlight was reduced amplifying the darkness of the forest floor.³

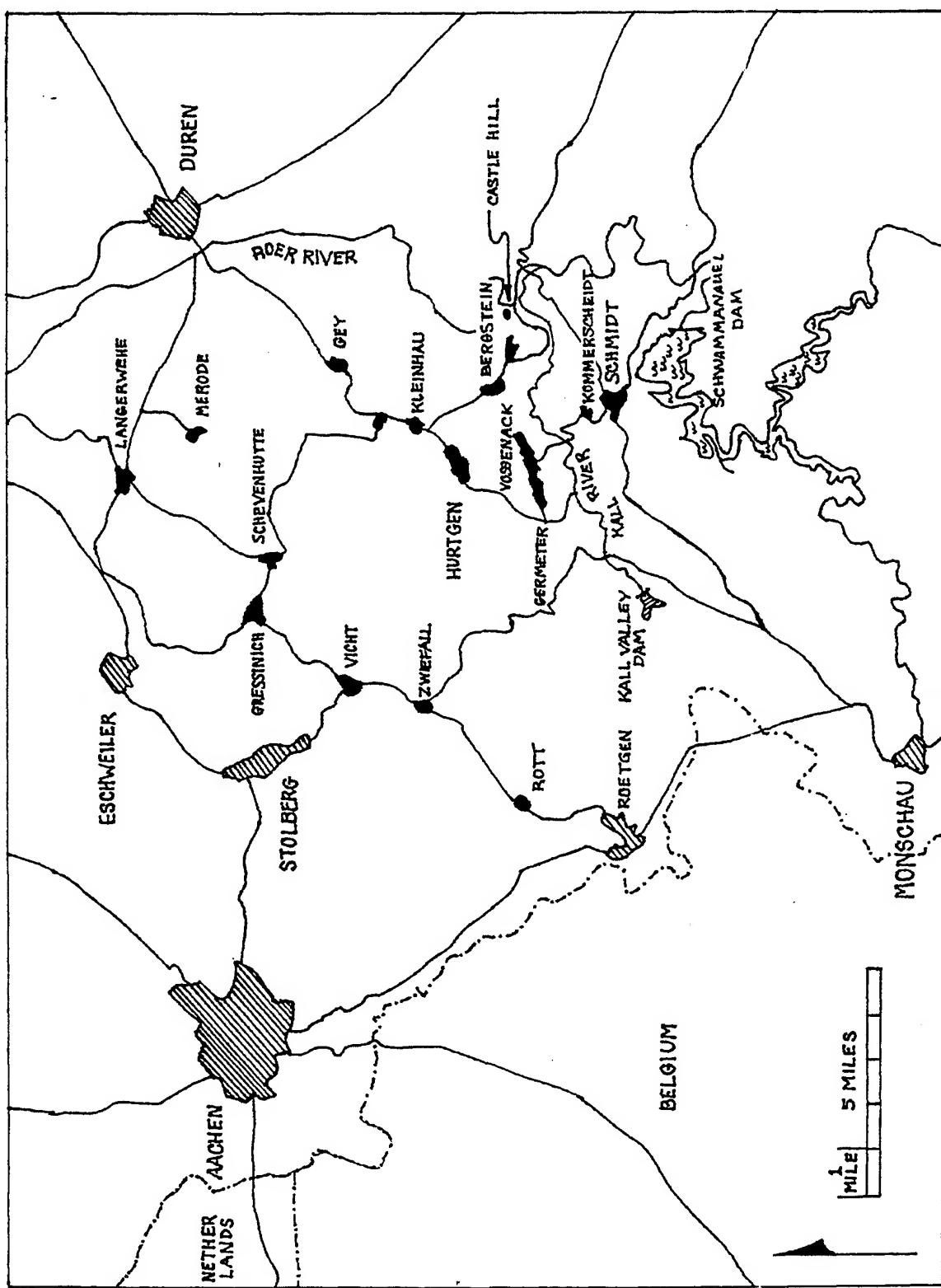
To add to the bitter fighting in the forest, the Americans were attacking straight into the robust defenses of the Westwall. The Westwall (known to the Allies as the Siegfried Line) was begun in 1936 as a short belt of fortifications opposite France's Maginot Line, guarding the Saar. Hitler later extended it from the Swiss border to the vicinity of Aachen. Unlike the thin Maginot Line, the Siegfried Line was a band of hundreds of mutually supporting bunkers, pillboxes and command posts. "The original purpose of the Westwall was to delay an enemy until the Germans could bring up mobile reserves. By 1944, however, such reserves no longer existed."⁴

In the Hürtgen Forest sector the Siegfried Line was actually two separate bands. In front of the wall was a network of dragon's teeth – concrete pyramids that stood five tall with thirty feet of concrete base underground. Next came the bunkers that had a seven-foot thick concrete roof and rear wall. The front wall was about four feet thick. "The Americans later found that it required at least 400 pounds of TNT to destroy one bunker"⁵ once the attackers negotiated the minefields, wire, and dealt with the supporting infantry surrounding the bunker. The Hürtgen forest was a defender's dream and an attacker's nightmare.

ALLIED OPERATIONS

ALLIED COMMAND AND STRATEGY

The strategic objectives projected by the Allies for the European Theater were the destruction of the German Army and the ability of the Germans to wage war - this was to be accomplished by securing the Ruhr and Saar industrial areas.



THE HÜRTGEN FOREST AND THE ROER RIVER DAMS

In August of 1944 the Allied forces were moving east. The German Army was in full retreat, fleeing back to the Reich. The Allies had finally broken out of the hedgerows of Normandy, liberated Paris, and completed the partial destruction of the German 5th Panzer Army and 7th Army in the Falaise pocket. Allied aircraft had complete mastery of the air causing the Germans to move forces only at night or during periods of limited visibility. Allied soldiers were extremely optimistic that the war would be over by Christmas. Staff Officers at Supreme Allied Headquarters (SHAEF) were less than optimistic because looming ahead of the advancing Allies was the Siegfried Line⁶ and the reality of the logistics shortage began to manifest itself.

Eisenhower had embraced from the beginning a "broad front" strategy to end the war.

The whole philosophy behind Eisenhower's broad-front policy was that it would keep the Germans occupied and stretched everywhere, oblige them to go on committing reserves as soon as they were created or, if not commit them, held them back in readiness and sufficient depth to be committed in order to counter yet one more dangerous salient. In other words, by keeping up the pressure everywhere, Eisenhower would keep the Germans off balance, keep them firmly on the defensive, retain the initiative securely in Allied hands and give the Germans no chance of getting it back.⁷

With the slowing of the Allied offensive and the menace of the Siegfried Line looming on the horizon, Eisenhower had the choice of putting his efforts to thrust into Germany with the 21st British Army Group via the Ruhr or with the 12th U.S. Army Group via Metz and the Saar. The Allies did not have the resources in men or supplies and equipment to make two equal thrusts. Briefly Eisenhower abandoned his "broad front" policy and acquiesced to Montgomery to allow him to carry out Operation MARKET-GARDEN, a single concentrated thrust, with the First Allied Airborne Army. Operation MARKET-GARDEN was "designed to cross the Rhine in Holland, outflank the West Wall, and place the Allies immediately on the doorstep of the Ruhr."⁸

Operation MARKET-GARDEN commenced on 17 September as three airborne divisions dropped into Holland to secure a bridgehead across the lower Rhine River. Due to the limited routes into and within Holland and the stiff German resistance it was obvious, soon after it started, that Operation MARKET-GARDEN had failed. Eisenhower abandoned Montgomery's "knife-like thrust" and decided to enter the winter of 1944 with the "broad front" policy. His philosophy was to keep constant pressure on the German Army to keep it from concentrating forces at any one place. In December 1944, Hitler

would show the Allies once again how unconventional he could truly be by concentrating the forces to counterattack in the Ardennes.

ALLIED ACTIONS LEADING TO THE HURTGEN

After the Operation MARKET-GARDEN failure, General Eisenhower designated the 21st British Army Group (Field Marshall Sir Bernard L. Montgomery) the main effort for the Allied drive to Germany. The 21st Army Group would attack and drive east, north of the Ardennes.

The ports necessary to sustain the armies were concentrated in the northern half of the Allied zone of attack as were the best routes to the Ruhr and V-weapon launching sites. Most of the withdrawing German formations were moving in the same direction... Eisenhower was reluctant to expose the northern wing of the armies to the chance of a concentrated German counterattack. He directed the 12th U.S. Army Group to make a secondary advance south of the Ardennes to draw German strength from the north...This put the Hürtgen Forest, Aachen, and the Roer River opposite the First Army (and VII Corps) zone of advance.⁹

Having fought a hard-won battle to capture the town of Aachen, the 1st U.S. Army (LTG Courtney Hodges) was ready to carry the battle across the Rhine River plain and into the heart of Germany. On its southern flank was the Hürtgen Forest. In order to advance past the town of Aachen, LTG Hodges decided that the forest had to be cleared in order to secure his right flank. Much like the Argonne Forest of World War I, the Hürtgen gave the Germans a place to counterattack into the flanks of the 1st Army as it attacked in the Stolberg Corridor in the North.

The German Army had been on the run for the past four months through France and the clearing of the forest should not be too difficult. Little did Hodges know his forces would be bogged down for months and suffer tremendous casualties.

ALLIED POSTURE PRIOR TO BATTLE

By September the 1st U.S. Army, consisting of V and VII Corps, was stalled. The rush across France had extended the strained transportation network to the point that the required supplies necessary to continue the attack were inadequate. Although Antwerp was captured on 3 September, the Germans held the Western approaches of the Schelde Estuary preventing the Allies from using the port until the German forces

were cleared from Walcheren Island. Allied forces finally cleared the approaches in November and the first ship unloaded supplies on the 28th.

The Allies still had to rely on the supplies coming from depots in the vicinity of the Normandy beachhead. The French rail network was badly damaged from the pre-Normandy bombing and was of little use to the Allies. The road system was adequate but the Allies had progressed so quickly to the east, that adequate motor transport had not been planned for. By the time the Allies had reached the German border supplies were being shipped over 300 miles by road.

LTG Omar Bradley, Commander 12th Army Group, responded quickly to the supply shortage and reduced the 1st Army daily allocation of supplies from 5,000 tons to 3,500 tons in order to accumulate reserves of gasoline and artillery ammunition for continued operations. This was mainly to give LTG George Patton's 3d U.S. Army a minimum amount of supplies to continue limited attacks in its area of operations. Bradley ordered the 1st Army to hold in place until the necessary ammunition could be brought forward to attack the Siegfried Line. "He would permit only limited reconnaissance while waiting to renew large-scale operations about 14 September."¹⁰

Due to the lack of intelligence concerning the German forces holding the Westwall, Hodges conducted a reconnaissance in force with both V and VII Corps. MG "Lightning" Joe Collins, commander of the 80,000 man strong VII Corps, was intent on getting his forces into the forest to "root out the second-rate German 353rd (and later the 275th) Infantry Divisions."¹¹ On 12 September Combat Command B of the 3d Armored Division began vigorous patrolling to root out the enemy.

"Because the strategic objective was the destruction of the enemy's capability to wage war, the stated American aim was to take the Ruhr and Saar industrial areas, while trying to destroy the German Army in the field. Along these lines, a stated interim objective was the capture of crossing sites over the Rhine. But before the Americans could cross the Rhine, they had to cross the Roer – and take the nearby dams."¹² The Germans controlled the dams and thus controlled the river levels, but the Americans did not realize the significance of the dams. The dams did not figure into American plans until well into November.

GERMAN OPERATIONS

GERMAN COMMAND AND STRATEGY

At this point in the war, Adolph Hitler was single-handedly directing military operations. The assassination attempt of 20 July 1944 affected him significantly both physically and psychologically. He no longer trusted the German General Staff and considered them disloyal, arrogant and conservative bureaucrats. He had isolated himself in his headquarters and surrounded himself with only his most trusted advisors who would carry out his orders and not question his judgment. Hitler considered himself as the only person to save Germany.

As the Germans retreated German commanders tried to convince Hitler to allow them to withdraw behind the moat of the Rhine to defend Germany. Hitler was adamant; his armies would defend as long as possible east of the Westwall, then the Westwall itself.¹³

Field Marshall Walter Model was selected to be the Commander in Chief-West and the Commander of Army Group B the third week in August. After assessing the situation, Model reported back to Hitler "the unequal struggle cannot continue."¹⁴ Hitler dismissed Model's pessimism and subsequently relieved him as Commander in Chief-West, but retained him as Commander Army Group B. Field Marshall Gerd von Rundstedt was reinstated to his former position of Commander in Chief-West. This relegated Model to concentrate on what he was famous for – fighting the defensive battle.¹⁵

The German Army was far from defeated. Rebuilding the broken army that had escaped from France was difficult but fortunately for Hitler, the Allies had allowed the staffs and cadres of the two field Armies, corps and several divisions to escape the Falaise-Argentan pocket. This permitted the German General Staff to rebuild the divisions and create new ones.

Von Rundstedt and Model continually plied Berlin for both men and equipment. "Hitler ordered the formation of another twenty-five divisions, and he told Rundstedt to hold Holland, the border defenses, the Moselle River, and the Vosges Mountains until the new units could stabilize the situation."¹⁶ During the Allied drive across France the German Army was constantly short of men and equipment. As the Allies reached the German border, the German Army almost reached parity personnel-wise with the Allies in November. "...Contrary to almost universal belief, Germany had not reached the peak

of war production until the fall of 1944 and still retained a considerable pool of manpower.”¹⁷ This drastic resurgence of the German Army would later be referred to as the Miracle of the West.

As the German Army Group West prepared to defend as ordered, little did they know that Hitler had plans fermenting in his mind for a counterattack through the Ardennes. Hitler related his general concept to his Chief of Wermacht Operations, General Alfred Jodl, and ordered him to start planning. Jodl identified the Ardennes as the best place to attack the Americans and started laying the groundwork of moving forces to the forests of the Eifel, east of the Ardennes, to prepare for the counterattack through the Ardennes. This was the main reason the Americans could not be allowed to cross the Roer. A great assemblage of German divisions was to begin to gather soon for the last great offensive.

GERMAN POSTURE PRIOR TO THE BATTLE

The 7th German Army commanded by General der Panzertruppen Erich Brandenberger, was fortunate the Americans delayed the attack into the Stolberg Corridor and Hürtgen Forest. “Army Group B had no reserves to speak of, and if the Americans spilled into the Stolberg Corridor, they might envelope the forest and outflank German positions between Aachen and Monschau.”¹⁸

The mission was clear, the Germans had to assemble enough men to occupy the Westwall and the border defenses. In order for the Westwall to be of any importance to the defense of Germany, the 7th German Army had to delay the U.S. 1st Army. Brandenburger reinforced Aachen on 15 September to further obstruct the 1st Army. “Had Collins sent even a reconnaissance element to Aachen before 15 September, he would have found that the city was his for the taking. If the Americans had taken Aachen at this time, it is possible that the Germans would have pulled out of at least the western half of the Stolberg Corridor and saved the Americans the trouble of fighting for nearly every yard of it.”¹⁹

On 16 September Oberst Gerhard Engel’s 12th Infantry Division arrived to engage the American 1st Division and 3d Armored Division and reinforce the badly undermanned 353d Division defending the Hürtgen Forest. “Until this time the Germans had been powerless to stop a strong American attack in the Stolberg Corridor – or the Hürtgen Forest – had they been able to mount one.”²⁰

THE BATTLE

Combat Command B of the 3rd Armored Division nicknamed "TF Lovelady" commenced a reconnaissance in force on 12 September 1944 to the south of Aachen. Encountering no resistance through the Belgium-German border crossing at Roentgen, Germany, TF Lovelady continued on through Roentgen until it reached the dragon's teeth of the Westwall. Initially stopped by a crater blown in the road by German combat engineers and later stopped by effective German small arms and artillery fire, TF Lovelady was forced to dig in for the night.

The next day TF Lovelady was able to move through the town of Rott until German tank and antitank fire disabled five American tanks and two halftracks. With the help of artillery, TF Lovelady continued on into the town of Mularshutte and spent the night.

TF Lovelady made it to the outskirts of Mausbach the next day, but was caught in an ambush by German assault guns and two Panther tanks. TF Lovelady spent the next four days trying to break out of Mausbach but by 20 September was down to only eleven of thirty-four tanks and had only one officer between the two companies. The remaining men were physically exhausted and near the breaking point when they finally fought their way back to Allied lines. "TF Lovelady had earned the dubious distinction of being the first unit to fight in the Hürtgen Forest."²¹

The U.S. 9th Infantry Division commenced its entrance into the forest on 12 September north of the ill-fated TF Lovelady. Its objective was the Roer River crossing sites at Düren. Quickly penetrating the outer defenses of the Westwall, the division advanced six miles before encountering the first wave of the German defense network on 15 September. Roadblocks, dense minefields, pre-sited artillery, and heavily defended pillboxes characterized the German defense. It was left to the infantry and engineers to breach the defenses. At the end of September, the 9th Infantry Division had made very little progress into the Hürtgen. The fighting was the worst the division had experienced and it had to be pulled off the line and sent to the rear to be reconstituted. The 60th Infantry Regiment had born the brunt of the fighting and had suffered almost 100 percent turnover of combat personnel.²²

To keep pressure on the German Army and to maintain the broad front, Hodges decided in early October to attack all along the border. The 9th Infantry Division again attacked into the Hürtgen on 6 October. Its objectives were the towns of Germeter and

Vossenack with a final objective of clearing and seizing the Schmidt-Steckenborn ridge.²³

After a brief rest and refit the 60th and the 39th Infantry Regiments attacked on a 3-mile front into the forest. It took the 60th Regiment 4 days and the 39th Regiment 5 days to advance about a kilometer and a half into the woods to the first clearing. The infantry had to then pause to allow the engineers to hack wider trails through the woods to allow tanks to support the infantry prior to exposing themselves in the open ground. To advance this far had cost the division almost a thousand men.²⁴

In classic German style, the Germans continually counterattacked each time the Americans gained ground. By 16 October the division held the first clearing and a few road junctions. This second advance gained an additional one and a half kilometers, but had cost the division 4,500 casualties. The division was declared to be combat ineffective and again had to be pulled to the rear.²⁵

LTG Hodges apparently never reevaluated the sense of sending more units into the vortex of the Hürtgen. The task of attacking into the Hürtgen Forest then fell on the 28th Infantry (Keystone) Division. Commanded by MG Norman "Dutch" Cota, it was tasked to capture the town of Schmidt. The VII Corps would need Schmidt and its road network as supply routes for its main drive to the Rhine. Cota protested to Hodges about attacking the Germans head on. Hodges refused to listen and told him to accomplish his mission by 5 November.²⁶

The 28th reinforced with three engineer battalions, a battalion of towed tank destroyers attacked on the morning of 2 November behind an artillery barrage and air strikes. The defenses of the Germans were so well concealed and hardened that air and artillery did little damage.²⁷ The Germans put up a vicious defense, exacting a huge cost on the American attackers. By the end of the first day the division had moved only yards and was stalled.

On 3 November, with the help of a combat command of the 5th Armored Division, the 3rd Battalion, 112th Regiment captured Schmidt. The only road into Schmidt from the west was the trail that skirted the Kall Gorge. No one had reconnoitered the road prior to the attack to ensure it would support tanks. When the reinforcing armor rolled down the Kall Trail, it became obvious that the road was too narrow and unstable. Engineers were sent to widen the trail, but as the first tank moved down the trail it rolled over a mine and lost a track. Only three tanks were able to reinforce the badly extended battalion in Schmidt.²⁸

The next morning, as if on schedule, the Germans counterattacked with tanks of the 116th Panzer Division supported by infantry. There was no help for the American battalion in Schmidt. Cota had already committed his reserve infantry battalion in Monschau to help the 4th Infantry Division prevent the Germans from attacking into his right flank. The Germans quickly overran Schmidt.²⁹

Sensing failure, Cota immediately reorganized the remainders of the shattered 3d Battalion, 112th Infantry and 3d Battalion, 110th Infantry, provided them with 7 tanks and ordered them to recapture Schmidt. As the infantry and tanks moved up the Kall Trail they started receiving accurate enemy small arms and artillery fire. The fight that ensued was fierce and bloody. Neither side made any progress and as darkness fell the worn out American survivors began a costly withdrawal down the trail.³⁰

Thus ended the second attack on Schmidt, and the most costly American divisional-strength attack of World War II.³¹ The German Army in the Hurtgen had consumed the 28th Infantry Division much like the 9th Infantry Division. The 28th was relieved on 13 November, exchanging places with the 8th Infantry Division. The 28th Infantry Division was sent to the thinly manned Ardennes sector to rest and refit. "In its part of the battle of the Hürtgen Forest, the Keystone Division had lost 6,184 casualties. The 112th Infantry alone had lost 2,093 including 544 nonbattle casualties; snow had become mixed with the incessant rain, and there were many frostbite and trench foot cases at the medical aid stations."³²

Still enthralled with breaking out of the Hürtgen Forest, General Bradley's 12th Army Group staff planned the largest air attack in support of ground troops during the war. The attack was known as Operation QUEEN. It was to replicate Operation COBRA, the air-ground attack that had allowed the Allies to break out of Normandy. "Recalling the catastrophic short bombing had wrought in Normandy, the planners developed an elaborate safety program... that was to put the bomb line of the heavy bombers two miles in front of the U.S. Forces."³³ Throughout the 12th Army Group's front some 4,500 planes would bomb the Germans to allow the stagnated forces to breakout of the vicinity of the Siegfried Line and into the open Roer plain.³⁴

From the Line of Departure of the 1st Infantry Division of the VII Corps at the town of Schevenhutte, the Roer River was only seven miles. From the point in the south of the Hürtgen Forest where the 8th Infantry Division of V Corps had relieved the 28th Infantry Division, the Roer was less than 3 miles away. The commanders were optimistic this was to be the final effort to stop the stalemate in the Hürtgen.

Hodges designated the VII Corps as the main effort and gave him the task of attacking in the North through the Eschweiler industrial complex, in the center the Hamich Ridge and in the South "a part of the Huertgen Forest that had hardly been penetrated at all."³⁵ Just south of the intended VII Corps attack, "...the 28th Division was stumbling off the stage, having completed its tragic role in the drama of the Hürtgen Forest."³⁶ D-Day for the attack was, depending on the weather, scheduled for 11-16 November. The weather finally broke on 16 November and intermittent skies allowed the Allied aircraft to complete their mission.³⁷

The effectiveness of the bombing was extremely hard to assess. Due to the elaborate safety precautions imposed on the bombers, most of the bombs fell well in the rear of the German forces. Few of the enemy's front line troops were hit hard. The only real damages that resulted were to the enemy communications network and the artillery batteries to the rear of the front line troops. The German artillery fire was much lighter than normal, but according to combat reports the heavy mortar fire more than made up for the difference as the Americans attacked.³⁸

As the 1st Army commenced its attack all divisions in the zone made moderate advances. The 4th Infantry Division to the south of the 1st Infantry Division attacked directly into the heart of the Hürtgen Forest. By 29 November the division was at the eastern edge of the forest, but it no longer had any offensive capability. In 13 days of fighting in the Hürtgen Forest the 4th Infantry Division advanced a little over three miles. "The division had suffered 4053 battle casualties, while another estimated 2000 had fallen to trench foot, respiratory diseases, and combat exhaustion. Thus the 4th Division could qualify for the dubious distinction of being second only to the 28th Division in casualties incurred in the forest."³⁹ On 3 -11 December the 4th Division was relieved and moved to the "relative safety" of Luxembourg just in time for the Battle of the Bulge.⁴⁰

The 3d Armored Division as well as the 1st Division had made relatively minor advances until the weather broke on the third day and allowed the IX Tactical Air Command to assist in the attack in the Stolberg Corridor and the northern fringes of the Hürtgen Forest. Capturing successive objectives the 1st Division finally reached the exit of the Stolberg Corridor on the 28 November. The six kilometers it had captured "had cost the Big Red One 3,993 casualties, 1,479 in the 26th Infantry alone, which had fought mostly inside the edge of the Hürtgen Forest. The 26th Infantry demonstrated the impact of its casualties on November 29 when it tried to capture Merode, a town just beyond the

northeast fringe of the forest. The attack failed with the loss of two companies, cut off and virtually destroyed.”⁴¹

The 8th Division of V Corps in the southern portion of the Hürtgen Forest made little progress also. Advancing less than 1500 meters in three days the 121st Infantry practically crumbled under the weight of the German defenses. One company collapsed under artillery fire. The regimental commander relieved both the battalion and company commander. The new company commander was killed the next day and within four days the regimental commander had relieved two more company commanders and a second battalion commander.⁴²

As the 8th Division closed in on the Roer, the German defenses – better prepared, supplied and reinforced - became more and more resolute. This American incursion was getting much too close to the mysterious troop movements in the enemy’s rear. The Germans were so desperate in hiding their massive counterattack force in the rear of the Ardennes they even mustered approximately 60 Messerschmitt Bf 109s to attack the V Corps on 3 December. The Germans also stepped up their counterattacks and increased their volume of artillery fire.⁴³

One of the last remaining objectives in the 8th Division sector was Castle Hill. This hilltop allowed the German observers excellent observation of the surrounding forest. The 8th Division had no units with the offensive strength to take the hill. “Fortunately, V Corps headquarters commanded the 2d Ranger Battalion, of Point du Hoc renown on D-Day.”⁴⁴ On 7 December, two companies of Rangers charged up and captured Castle Hill. Withering artillery barrages and incessant counterattacks wore down the stubborn Rangers to a strength of only 25 men before they were reinforced a day later.⁴⁵ The Rangers had held Castle Hill but paid an extremely high price.

“The Battle of the Bulge signaled the end of the first phase of the Battle of the Hürtgen Forest.”⁴⁶ The Germans had successfully held 1st Army in a stalemate while the mass of German forces in the south prepared for Hitler’s final offensive. Had the Germans not wasted their forces in the Ardennes they very easily could have delayed the crossing of the Rhine until late into 1945.⁴⁷

The final battles of the Hürtgen Forest started on 30 January with the 78th Infantry setting the stage for the drive on the Schwammenauel dam. There was tremendous pressure – “from SHAEF all the way down”⁴⁸ - to capture the dam by 10 February so the forces north could continue the attack. On 10 February, the Regiment captured the dam intact.

STRATEGIC ANALYSIS

ALLIED ASSESSMENT

The historian Martin Blumensen theorized that this unexpected success of the Allied breakout and subsequent pursuit of the German Army across France caused Eisenhower and his senior generals to consider the German Army no longer a threat. This optimism prevailed through the drive through France and only diminished when the Allies hit the Westwall. According to Blumensen, Eisenhower and Bradley were optimistically planning future operations into Germany, before they had actually annihilated the German Armies in the Falaise pocket. Bradley's mind was on crossing the Rhine and Eisenhower had his eyes on Berlin. Blumensen also faulted the Allied planners for being terrain oriented in assigning objectives. "The result was tactical and operational carelessness and negligence, together with a misreading of what was required to vanquish the enemy."⁴⁹

As stated earlier, the Miracle of the West might not have been conducted had the German staffs been destroyed or captured as most of their units had been in the Falaise-Argentan Gap. Blumensen stated, "Conditioned by the Overlord planning, which established possession of the lodgment area as the objective, the three Allied leaders [Eisenhower, Montgomery, and Bradley] forgot a basic precept of warfare. They believed the capture of terrain instead of the destruction of the enemy to be the correct way to win the war."⁵⁰ The absence of a comprehensive phased Allied plan to destroy the enemy's means to wage war after the breakout at Normandy also contributed to the battles of the Hürtgen.

Throughout the battle for the Hürtgen Forest the Americans fought without the tactics that had been so successful throughout the drive through France – combined arms. The road network did not support the use of armor. The American tankers were plagued by narrow trails and the need for infantry support to move anywhere in the forest. German artillery had the key crossroads, clearings and other terrain features registered throughout the forest. Air support throughout the battle was hampered by bad weather. The Germans by now had become use to moving units only at night to avoid air attack. The terrain of the forest and the hardened positions of the Germans further prevented Allied air from having the effect it had previously. The Americans gave up their superiority in artillery as they attacked because observers in many cases could see

only yards in front of them and again the Germans made great use of bunkers and pillboxes.

So why did LTG Hodges continually send unit after unit into the forest? And why did neither of his subordinate army commanders try to dissuade him. In a 1983 interview Collins responded to that question: "The Germans didn't counterattack against my flank, because we had some troops there [the Hürtgen] that would have prevented them from doing so, but if we would have turned loose of the Hürtgen and let the Germans roam there, they could have hit my flank. It's easy to go back to second-guess and say, 'Well you shouldn't have done that.' Then what would you have done? Who would have cleared it? How much time would it have taken?"⁵¹

Collins is correct that it is easy to second-guess the decisions made almost 40 years earlier. Hodges and Collins must have felt tremendous pressure in 1944 to cross the Roer River and into the industrial center of Germany. But to throw in division after division into the Hürtgen Forest is still a question that begs to be answered. Part of the reason may have been the inadequacy of U.S. intelligence and the fact that the Hürtgen Forest did not lend itself to reconnaissance to determine the strength of the German force defending it.

Why didn't the Americans put a blocking force in the north of the forest to prevent the Germans from attacking the northern flank? Generalmajor von Gersdorff stated, "There was no use in the Americans going through the Hürtgen Forest...Had you gone around it on both sides you would have had almost no opposition."⁵² This was probably true in the early part of September 1944, but the Americans did not have it easy due to German reinforcements.

The main reason the Americans did not attack through the Stolberg Corridor, or even the Monschau Corridor in the south, early in September 1944 is due to the logistics shortage suffered throughout the Allied armies in Europe. The lack of supplies literally stopped the 12th Army Group from continuing its attacks into Germany. Adequate supplies might have allowed Hodges to bypass the Hürtgen entirely. Once the 1st Army was bogged down due to the shortage of gasoline, artillery ammunition and all the other supplies needed to support an army in the attack, it was too late – the German defenses had coalesced.

Another question arises as to why the Americans overlooked the most important operational objectives of this part of the campaign – the Roer River dams – until November 1944. The original objective was to clear the forest and open supply routes

through it for the crossing of the Roer. As stated earlier Eisenhower and Bradley were too optimistic and were not looking at the intermediate objectives that would ultimately accomplish the strategic objectives. Blumensen also faulted the Americans with being terrain-oriented when the objective was, in reality, to destroy the German Army.⁵³ Historian Russell Weigley blamed the failure to designate the dams as key objectives early in the battle as a "part of a 'pattern of uninquisitive headquarters planning' among the Allies during the late autumn."⁵⁴

Once the battle of attrition had started in the forest, it became the age-old problem of when to quit or how to measure success. The American Army had several problems working against them. The first was the problem of leadership forward. There are relatively few documented instances where division commanders actually walked the ground in the Hürtgen Forest. The division and corps staff officers did not become casualties, as did the line officers. They were free to come up with another plan to gain ground when the men actually charged with taking the ground normally lasted only days before being wounded or killed.

Another reason that American leadership did not look upon the casualties in the forest as unreasonable was that there were always replacements. Many were unseasoned, reclassified cooks, clerks, drivers, air defense and aircrews that had been combed from rear echelon units. The problem was compounded by the attrition of the combat experienced riflemen and noncommissioned officers. Integrating fresh replacements into squads and platoons was difficult in any combat situation, but in the Hürtgen Forest it was almost impossible. Many replacements became casualties so quickly they did not know what platoon, company, or battalion they were in when taken to aid stations. Throughout the battle many subordinate commanders "painted a rosy picture" of progress to higher headquarters. This was even easier when replacements were readily available.⁵⁵

The last reason was the American leadership was still optimistic that just one more fresh division would be enough to push the Germans from the forest. In the battle, the Americans used five infantry divisions, a combat command of armor, an additional armored infantry battalion and a Ranger battalion. As the 1st Army G-3, BG Thorsen put it: "We had the bear by the tail, and we just couldn't turn it loose."⁵⁶

Neither Bradley, Hodges, nor their staffs clearly envisioned the end state of the advance to the Ruhr. Had they immediately attacked Aachen and then into the Stolberg Corridor they could have saved much time and manpower that would be needed later on

in the year. Nor did they designate the Roer River dams as operational objectives until late November. As long as the war seemed to be won, it is easier to dismiss the dams as a problem than to make a detailed plan for their capture.⁵⁷ Weigley states that caution was the nemesis of Bradley, Collins and Hodges. Had the dams been assigned as the operational objectives "the full-scale clearing of the forest, the bitter combat for every obscure crossroads, need not have happened."⁵⁸

As for attacking straight into the forest and the Westwall, Hodges no doubt hoped to attack through the Westwall, secure it and allow his armor to punch through to the Rhine before he had to pause and refit. Hodges and his commanders were assuming the Westwall was heavily defended and made plans to attack it in detail. He nonetheless had to ensure his flank and rear was secured in the Hürtgen Forest. Could he have attacked into the forest enough to secure his flank to allow his more mobile armor units to attack through the Stolberg Corridor? The German defenders had little or no mobility and probably could not have mounted a credible counterattack.⁵⁹ Or could Hodges have made his main effort the V Corps to the South to attack through the Monschau Corridor? He would have still had to secure his northern flank in the south of the Hürtgen Forest. This is all hypothetical of course, but either course of action would have lessened the battles of attrition in the forest itself.⁶⁰

GERMAN ASSESSMENT

Hitler could not have picked a better place to fight than the Hürtgen Forest to fight an economy of force battle. Throughout the fall of 1944, his commanders in the Hürtgen area fought an incredibly successful delaying battle. This gave Hitler time to mass his forces in the Schnee Eifel at the rear of the Ardennes to prepare for the counterattack.

Model and his staff were pleasantly surprised when the Americans attacked straight into the forest instead of driving for the dams. He also knew the Americans would have to fight with a reduced combined arms team – armor and aircraft would not benefit the attackers. Generalmajor von Gersdorff stated, "There was no use in the Americans going through the Hürtgen Forest... Had you gone around it on both sides, you would have had almost no opposition."⁶¹

The American piecemeal attacks that were waged in September gave Model and his subordinate commanders time to blunt the initial attack through the Stolberg Corridor and prepare defenses in the forest. By October, the Germans had turned the Hürtgen

into the attacker's nightmare. This gave Hitler the secure northern flank he needed to attack through the Ardennes.

CONCLUSION

The Germans won the race to the German border and with some luck and fresh forces stopped the Americans short of the Roer River prior to the attack in the Ardennes. The fighting in the Hürtgen Forest was costly for both sides, but the loss of trained officers and noncommissioned officers was much more costly for the Germans because they no longer had the ability to replace them.

From September until 16 December the American 1st Army suffered 7,024 killed in action, 35,115 wounded, and 4,860 missing and captured. German casualty records were destroyed at the end of the war so it is not known the extent of German casualties, but the "Americans had battered at least six German divisions. They also had eliminated hundreds of individual replacements... They also had forced the Germans to commit some of the forces intended to be used for the Ardennes counteroffensive."⁶²

The battle of the Hürtgen Forest produced tangible German casualties, which supported the strategic objective of destroying the German army, but at what cost? As for destroying the German ability to wage war, no strategic objectives were accomplished. Even the important operational objectives of the Roer River dams were overlooked until the Americans were hopelessly bogged down in the forest.

The Hürtgen Forest resembled the battle of the Argonne of World War I or Grant's battle of the Wilderness in the Civil War. All three produced horrendous casualties, but produced little in the way of tangible objectives. "The Hürtgen was a worse American military tragedy than the Wilderness or the Argonne."⁶³

WORD COUNT = 6903

ENDNOTES

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⁴ Ibid., 8.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Robert A. Lynn, "The Hurtgenwald," Military Heritage, April 2000, 54.

⁷ John Strawson, The Battle for the Ardennes, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), 158.

⁸ Russell Weigley, Eisenhower's Lieutenants. The Campaign of France and Germany 1944-1945. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), 279.

⁹ Miller, 10.

¹⁰ Ibid., 11.

¹¹ Lynn, 55.

¹² Miller, 204.

¹³ Charles B. MacDonald, The Mighty Endeavor – American Armed Forces in the European Theater in World War II (New York, New York: The Oxford University Press, 1969), 334.

¹⁴ Miller, 6.

¹⁵ Ibid., 8.

¹⁶ Ibid., 9.

¹⁷ Charles B. MacDonald, The Siegfried Line Campaign (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1993), 392.

¹⁸ Miller, 17.

¹⁹ Ibid., 19

²⁰ Ibid.

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²² Lynn, 56.

²³ Miller, 37.

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²⁶ Lynn, 57.

²⁷ MacDonald, The Siegfried Line Campaign, 343.

²⁸ Lynn, 58.

²⁹ Weigley, 367.

³⁰ Miller, 74.

³¹ Lynn, 58.

³² Weigley, 368.

³³ MacDonald, The Siegfried Line Campaign, 405.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 408.

³⁶ Ibid., 411.

³⁷ Ibid., 412.

³⁸ Ibid., 416.

³⁹ Ibid., 474.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Weigley, 421.

⁴² Ibid., 418.

⁴³ Ibid., 419.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Miller, 197.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 193.

⁴⁹ Martin Blumenson, The Battle of the Generals (New York, New York: William Morrow and C., 1993), 262.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Miller, 205.

⁵² Ibid., 210

⁵³ Ibid., 204

⁵⁴ Ibid., 206

⁵⁵ MacDonald, The Siegfried Line Campaign, 469-470

⁵⁶ Ibid., 493.

⁵⁷ Miller, 206.

⁵⁸ Weigley, 432.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 432.

⁶⁰ Miller, 206.

⁶¹ Ibid., 210.

⁶² MacDonald, The Siegfried Line Campaign, 492.

⁶³ Weigley, 432.

